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Indications Point to Iranian Attack Soon

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WASHINGTON, June 4 — American intelligence officials said today that signs were accumulating that Iran might finally launch its long-expected ground offensive against Iraqi positions around the key city of Basra.

With more than 300,000 Iranian forces in the vicinity since April, such an offensive is viewed by American officials as likely to take place soon, possibly with a decisive impact on the conflict, which began in September 1980.

The officials cautioned, however, that they had been expecting the offensive since April and it had not occurred. The number of Iranian forces has at times been put as high as 500,000, many of them thought to be student volunteers.

The assessment here is that despite Iran's "human-wave" tactics, Iraq forces will inflict heavy casualties on the Iranians and keep them from severing road links between Basra and Baghdad, officials said.

If Iran is unsuccessful and has heavy casualties, chances for a negotiated end to the conflict might improve, some officials said. Algerian diplomats are in both Iran and Iraq today, again urging a cease-fire.

Iran Maneuvered at U.N.

Japanese and Soviet officials have also urged the Iranians to negotiate, as have the Turks, in recent days. But American officials say they doubt the Iranians will agree to negotiate before they see the results of the attack.

They said Iran had seemed to show more interest recently in discussing diplomatic aspects of the war than usual. In the recent United Nations Security Council debate, which led to the censure of Iran, the Iranians boycotted the meetings but privately submitted language through third world countries, officials said, to soften the impact of the vote. Iran, for instance, avoided condemnation by name.

But Iran overcomes Iraq's strong defenses and cuts Basra off, there could be striking repercussions in Baghdad, officials said, including the replacement of President Saddam Hussein. The Iranians have demanded his ouster and large reparations as their price for ending the war.

Message From the Ayatollah

Officials said Iran and Iraq had stepped up shelling of each other's positions around Basra, Iraq's main port to the gulf, in anticipation of renewed fighting. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Iranian leader, sent a message to his troops that was apparently intercepted by Western monitors. It said that Tuesday could be "an epic day," for them. June 5 is the anniversary of religious demonstrations in Iran in 1963 that culminated in the overthrow of the Shah 16 years later.

There had been speculation in intelligence reports that Iran would strike during Ramadan, the Moslem holy month. Ramadan began last Friday.

Iraq has tried to weaken Iran by attacking tankers and other ships within 50 miles of Iran's main oil terminal, which is Kharg Island. Iraq wants to keep foreign tankers from loading Iran's oil and deprive Iran of foreign exchange it needs to buy arms and other equipment abroad.

Iran responded twice last month to those attacks by hitting Kuwaiti and Saudi tankers. But there has been no retaliation from the Iranians for two weeks. Iran has said it does not want to spread the war to the rest of the Persian Gulf and wants good relations with other gulf countries. Iran, aware of Washington's offer to help the Saudis defend themselves, seems leery of giving the United States an excuse to intervene on the side of the Arabs.

Iran is said to have fewer than 30 planes operational. The lack of air power and the reluctance of Iran to in-

volve the United States has strengthened the view of those who believe Iran will begin the ground offensive.

This presumably would not give other countries justification for intervening on Iraq's side. Iraq has warned that in case of such an attack, it will attack Kharg Island itself to try to stop Iran's already reduced oil exports.

Iran has said that if it is unable to export oil through the gulf it will make it impossible for others to do so also.